

# Unemployment as Lived Exclusion: A Phenomenological Study of Persons with Disabilities in Rural Mankayan

Wilbert B. Wanas\*., Claire G. Bunagan., Nixon G. Nasuchod., Kenjie C. Osben., Clyde K. Sugot

Department of Education – Guinaoang National High School, Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

Unemployment among persons with disabilities (PWDs) remains a persistent concern shaped by structural barriers, social attitudes, and everyday realities within marginalized communities. In the Cordillera region of the Philippines, where rural livelihoods and community relations influence access to opportunities, unemployment is experienced beyond economic deprivation. This study explores the lived experiences of unemployed persons with disabilities in a rural Cordillera community, focusing on how unemployment is understood, endured, and negotiated in daily life.

Using a qualitative phenomenological approach informed by Colaizzi's method, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected participants. The analysis examined participants' processes of meaning-making, their everyday experiences, and the ways they cope within conditions of constraint.

Findings show that unemployment is lived as a sustained condition of exclusion that shapes identity, limits participation, and challenges personal dignity. Participants described being labeled as incapable, navigating bodily limitations, and encountering both overt and subtle forms of social judgment. Daily life was marked by dependency, restricted mobility, and survival-oriented thinking, where immediate needs often take priority over long-term aspirations. Coping was expressed through endurance, supported by family ties, emotional restraint, and faith-based practices. Community responses were experienced as uneven, ranging from support to pity and silence, further influencing participants' sense of belonging.

The study frames unemployment as a lived and meaning-laden condition and highlights the need for context-sensitive employment policies and community-based support systems that recognize dignity, agency, and the everyday realities of persons with disabilities.

**Keywords:** persons with disabilities, unemployment, lived experience, phenomenology, rural communities, social exclusion

## INTRODUCTION

Unemployment among persons with disabilities (PWDs) remains a persistent social concern shaped by structural barriers, limited access to inclusive work environments, and enduring social attitudes toward disability. Across contexts, persons with disabilities continue to experience disproportionately higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to non-disabled populations, even when controlling for education and demographic factors (Mitra & Yap, 2023; Schur & Blanck, 2022). These disparities are not only the result of physical and institutional constraints but are also influenced by societal perceptions of capability, productivity, and worth, which continue to shape hiring practices and workplace inclusion (World Health Organization, 2019).

In the Philippine context, these challenges are further intensified by uneven policy implementation and limited employment opportunities, particularly in rural and geographically isolated areas. Studies have shown that many persons with disabilities remain excluded from stable employment and are often confined to informal or vulnerable work arrangements (Mina, 2013). Barriers such as limited mobility, lack of accessible infrastructure,

and insufficient skills development opportunities continue to restrict their participation in the labor force (Imbong & Pielago, 2021). In upland communities such as Mankayan, Benguet, where local economies are constrained and livelihood options are limited, these structural barriers intersect with social stigma, resulting in compounded forms of exclusion.

While existing research has largely focused on employment gaps and structural inequalities, less attention has been given to how unemployment is lived and interpreted by persons with disabilities in their everyday lives. For many individuals, unemployment extends beyond the absence of income and becomes embedded in daily routines, relationships, and identity. Experiences of exclusion, dependency, and reduced participation shape how persons with disabilities understand their place within society and influence their sense of dignity and self-worth (Banks, Kuper, & Polack, 2017). Disability scholars further emphasize that lived experience is central to understanding the realities of disability, as it captures how individuals navigate both structural barriers and social meanings in their daily lives (Shakespeare et al., 2021).

In rural contexts, these experiences are shaped by localized socio-cultural dynamics where community relationships play a central role in everyday life. Rural livelihoods are often characterized by informality, limited economic diversification, and reliance on social networks, which can both support and constrain individuals (Chambers, 1997). In such environments, unemployment is not only an economic condition but also a social experience influenced by recognition, participation, and belonging within the community. The condition of precarity further narrows individuals' focus toward immediate survival needs, often limiting their capacity to plan for long-term opportunities (Standing, 2020). In the Cordillera region, particularly in communities such as Mankayan, these dynamics are intensified by geographic isolation and localized patterns of livelihood and social interaction.

Despite growing attention to disability and employment, there remains limited research that centers on the lived experiences of unemployed persons with disabilities in rural Philippine settings. Much of the literature has focused on urban contexts or generalized barriers, leaving a gap in understanding how unemployment is experienced, interpreted, and endured within specific communities. There is a need to examine how unemployment shapes everyday life, identity, and dignity, as well as how individuals cope with and navigate their circumstances within their social environment.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of unemployed persons with disabilities in a rural Cordillera community. It seeks to understand how unemployment is experienced and given meaning in everyday life, how it shapes daily routines, relationships, and emotional well-being, and how individuals cope with and endure its effects within conditions of constraint. It also examines how community responses, including support, judgment, and silence, influence participants' sense of belonging and self-worth. Using a phenomenological approach informed by Colaizzi's method, the study aims to surface the shared meanings and essential structures of unemployment as lived by persons with disabilities, contributing to a deeper understanding of unemployment as a lived and meaning-laden condition.

This study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) facing unemployment in a rural community in Mankayan, Benguet. It seeks to examine how unemployment is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within the context of participants' everyday lives.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do persons with disabilities in a rural community in Mankayan experience unemployment in their everyday lives?
2. How do participants describe and interpret their experiences of unemployment?
3. How does unemployment shape their daily lives, relationships, and sense of self?
4. What meanings do participants attach to unemployment in relation to dignity, identity, and participation?

5. How do persons with disabilities cope with and endure unemployment within their social context?
6. How are community responses experienced, and how do these shape participants' sense of belonging and self-worth?

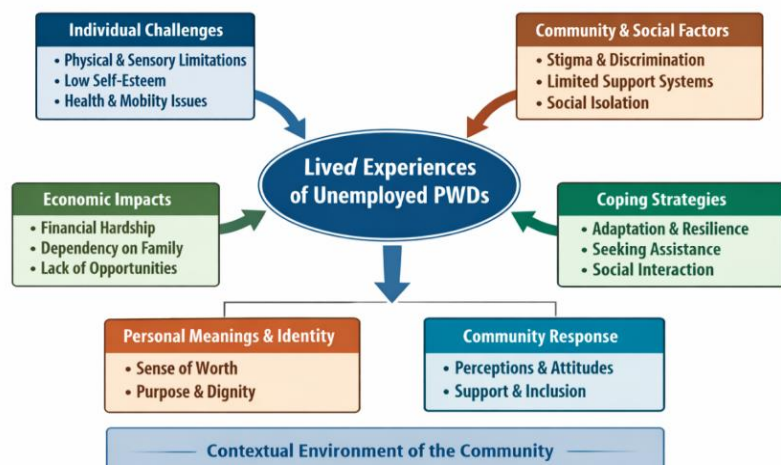


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Lived Experience of Unemployment among Persons with Disabilities.

This study is grounded in a phenomenological understanding of unemployment as a lived and meaning-laden experience among persons with disabilities. Rather than treating unemployment as a purely economic condition, the framework views it as shaped by bodily limitations, social interaction, and everyday survival within a specific community context.

At its core, unemployment is understood as a socially constructed condition influenced by structural exclusion, health-related constraints, and community perceptions. These factors form the context within which lived experiences emerge. The framework is organized into three interconnected domains.

First, **meaning-making** captures how participants interpret unemployment in relation to identity, dignity, and self-worth, often shaped by experiences of judgment and perceived incapacity. Second, **everyday life experience** reflects how unemployment restructures daily routines, relationships, and emotional states, including dependency, reduced participation, and survival-oriented living. Third, **coping and endurance** represent how participants manage their condition through emotional restraint, acceptance, family support, and faith-based practices.

The conceptual framework serves as the analytical lens through which the findings of this study are interpreted. It guided the identification and organization of themes by framing unemployment as a lived experience shaped by meaning-making, everyday life conditions, and processes of coping and endurance within a specific social context. In the analysis, participants' narratives were examined in relation to how they construct meaning around unemployment, how it restructures their daily lives, and how they respond to and endure its effects within the community. The framework also informed the interpretation of community responses as relational processes that influence identity, dignity, and participation. Through this lens, the results are not treated as isolated categories but as interconnected dimensions of a shared lived experience, allowing for a more coherent and phenomenologically grounded understanding of unemployment among persons with disabilities.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) facing unemployment in a rural community in Mankayan, Benguet.

Phenomenology was selected to capture how unemployment is experienced, interpreted, and given meaning in participants' everyday lives. Rather than treating unemployment as a purely economic condition, the study approached it as a lived phenomenon shaped by social interaction, bodily limitation, and everyday survival.

The study was guided by Colaizzi's method of phenomenological analysis, which enables systematic extraction of meanings and identification of the essential structure of lived experience. This approach is appropriate for examining how participants describe, reflect on, and make sense of unemployment within their specific social context.

### **Research Locale**

The study was conducted in a rural community in Mankayan, Benguet, located in the Cordillera region of the Philippines. The area is characterized by limited employment opportunities, localized economic activity, and strong community-based social relationships. These conditions provide a relevant context for examining unemployment among persons with disabilities, as both structural constraints and social dynamics shape access to livelihood and participation in community life.

The selected community was chosen due to the presence of unemployed PWDs and its representation of the socio-economic conditions common in rural upland areas, where employment opportunities are limited and social interaction plays a significant role in shaping everyday experiences.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The study involved ten (10) persons with disabilities who were currently unemployed and residing in the selected community. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is appropriate for phenomenological research as it allows the inclusion of individuals who have direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon under study.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) individuals identified as persons with disabilities, (2) currently unemployed or without stable employment, (3) residing in the selected community in Mankayan, (4) aged 18 years and above, and (5) willing and able to articulate their experiences. Participants with varying types of disabilities were included to capture a range of lived experiences.

The sample size of ten participants was deemed sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, as it allows for in-depth exploration of experiences while maintaining analytical depth.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences of unemployment, its effects on daily life, coping strategies, and interactions within the community.

Interviews were conducted in a language comfortable for the participants to ensure clarity and authenticity of responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a setting that ensured privacy and comfort. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Probing questions were used to deepen responses and clarify meanings, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and articulate the significance of unemployment in their lives.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. The analysis followed seven systematic steps: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) extraction of significant statements relevant to the phenomenon, (3) formulation of meanings from these statements, (4) organization of meanings into

clusters of themes, (5) development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, (6) identification of the fundamental structure of the lived experience, and (7) validation of findings through participant feedback.

This method ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives while allowing the identification of shared meanings and essential structures of the experience of unemployment among persons with disabilities.

### **Data Saturation**

Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, where no new themes or significant insights emerged from additional interviews. Saturation was observed after repeated patterns and meanings became evident across participants' narratives, indicating that sufficient depth and variation of experiences had been captured.

### **Researcher Reflexivity and Bracketing**

To maintain rigor and minimize bias, the researchers engaged in reflexivity and bracketing throughout the research process. Prior assumptions, beliefs, and expectations about unemployment and disability were consciously acknowledged and set aside to focus on participants' lived experiences.

The researchers maintained reflective notes during data collection and analysis to monitor personal biases and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts. This process helped preserve the authenticity of the data and supported the credibility of the findings.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to established criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of their responses to confirm accuracy. Dependability was supported through a clear documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in verbatim data and maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to ethical principles in conducting research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, ensuring that participants fully understood the purpose of the study, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality.

Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researchers. Care was taken to conduct interviews in a manner that respected participants' dignity and emotional well-being. Participants were not required to answer any questions they found uncomfortable, and the researchers remained sensitive to potential emotional responses during the interview process.

## **RESULTS**

### **Theme 1: Unemployment as a Condition of Exclusion, Loss, and Survival Meaning**

Unemployment among persons with disabilities in this study emerged not as a temporary economic condition but as a sustained and socially constructed experience shaped by exclusion, loss, and survival-oriented interpretation. Participants did not frame unemployment as a matter of personal choice or lack of effort. Instead, it was experienced as an imposed condition rooted in how their bodies, capabilities, and identities were evaluated within both institutional and community contexts. This framing reflects broader patterns identified in disability research, where unemployment is often produced through structural and attitudinal barriers rather than individual limitations (Mitra & Yap, 2023).

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## Being Labeled Unfit and Unwanted

Participants' experiences reveal that unemployment was strongly associated with processes of labeling that positioned them as unfit for work. These labels were often conveyed through formal and informal mechanisms, including medical assessments, employer preferences, and everyday comparisons with able-bodied individuals. Rather than being evaluated based on skills or experience, participants described how their perceived physical limitations became the primary basis for judgment. As a result, exclusion from employment was experienced as immediate and unquestioned.

This form of labeling functioned as a powerful mechanism of marginalization. It communicated not only a lack of suitability for work but also a diminished sense of value within the labor system. Over time, repeated encounters with such judgments contributed to a normalization of rejection, where participants began to anticipate exclusion as an expected outcome. This aligns with literature on disability and labor markets, which highlights how rigid standards of productivity and physical capability systematically disadvantage persons with disabilities (Groce et al., 2019).

Beyond formal employment contexts, the perception of being unwanted was reinforced through everyday social interactions. Participants became aware that their presence in the labor sphere was often dismissed or overlooked, further embedding the idea that unemployment was not situational but inherent to their condition. This process of internalizing exclusion reflects how structural barriers are translated into personal experiences of marginalization, shaping how individuals understand their place within society.

## Bodily Limitation as a Daily Reminder of Unemployment

The experience of unemployment was deeply intertwined with participants' bodily conditions. Rather than being confined to moments of job application or rejection, physical limitations were described as persistent and embodied realities that reinforced unemployment in everyday life. Pain, weakness, and reduced mobility were not only functional constraints but also symbolic reminders of exclusion from work.

Participants' narratives suggest that the body functioned as both a lived experience and a social marker. On one hand, physical discomfort limited the range of activities they could perform, particularly in labor-intensive environments common in rural settings. On the other hand, bodily difference became a visible criterion through which others evaluated their capacity to work. This dual role of the body reflects the intersection of physical and social dimensions of disability, where impairment is compounded by societal expectations and norms (Shakespeare et al., 2021).

The continuous presence of bodily limitation also shaped how participants imagined their possibilities. Rather than viewing unemployment as temporary, many perceived it as an enduring condition tied to their physical state. This perception narrowed their sense of agency and reinforced the belief that employment opportunities were inherently inaccessible. In this way, unemployment was not only experienced externally but also internalized through the body as a site of limitation and constraint.

## Unemployment as a Threat to Dignity and Self-Worth

Unemployment was experienced as a direct challenge to participants' sense of dignity and self-worth. Beyond economic deprivation, the absence of work exposed individuals to forms of social interaction that undermined their value as members of the community. Experiences of ridicule, pity, and indirect discrimination contributed to a perception of diminished status, affecting how participants saw themselves and how they believed others perceived them.

These experiences were often subtle yet persistent. Rather than overt exclusion alone, participants described how everyday interactions communicated reduced worth, whether through dismissive attitudes, jokes, or silent distancing. Such encounters shaped emotional responses, including sadness, frustration, and withdrawal, highlighting the psychological dimensions of unemployment. This finding is consistent with studies that link unemployment among persons with disabilities to lowered self-esteem and heightened emotional distress, particularly when exclusion is perceived as identity-based rather than performance-based (Imbong & Pielago, 2021).

The threat to dignity was further intensified by the inability to fulfill socially valued roles, particularly as contributors to family and community life. Work was associated not only with income but also with responsibility, independence, and recognition. Its absence disrupted these roles, leading participants to question their sense of purpose and belonging. In this context, unemployment became a moral and social condition, where dignity was continuously negotiated within everyday interactions.

### **Unemployment Understood Through Survival Thinking**

Participants interpreted unemployment through a survival-oriented lens, where daily life became centered on meeting immediate needs rather than pursuing long-term aspirations. Concerns about food, financial resources, and basic necessities dominated their thinking, shaping how they organized their time and priorities. This focus on survival reflects how material deprivation restructures cognitive and emotional processes, directing attention toward urgent needs (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

Survival thinking also created a cycle of constraint. Limited financial resources restricted participants' ability to seek employment, particularly when job searching required transportation, communication, or other expenses. As a result, unemployment was experienced as self-reinforcing, where lack of resources prevented access to opportunities that could potentially improve their situation. This dynamic aligns with research on poverty and unemployment, which shows how material constraints can sustain cycles of exclusion (Standing, 2020).

In some cases, the pressure to meet basic needs led to internal moral tension, as participants grappled with thoughts of engaging in actions they would otherwise avoid. This highlights how survival conditions can challenge personal values and reshape decision-making processes. Rather than reflecting individual weakness, these experiences point to the broader impact of economic deprivation on moral and emotional life (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014).

Taken together, these subthemes illustrate how unemployment was understood as a condition shaped by exclusion, embodied limitation, threats to dignity, and survival-oriented thinking. These dimensions are not isolated but interconnected, forming a complex lived experience that extends beyond economic definitions of unemployment.

### **Theme 2: Daily Life Restructured by Constraint, Dependency, and Reduced Participation**

Unemployment significantly reshaped participants' daily lives, altering routines, relationships, and patterns of social participation. Rather than structured days organized around work, participants described daily life as loosely arranged and often characterized by inactivity, dependency, and limited engagement with the broader community. These changes reflect how unemployment extends into the temporal and social dimensions of everyday living.

#### **Disrupted Daily Routines and Altered Use of Time**

The absence of employment disrupted participants' daily routines, leading to unstructured and repetitive patterns of time use. Without the organizing framework of work, days were often described as lacking direction and purpose. Activities were reduced to basic functions, such as resting, eating, and waiting, with limited opportunities for meaningful engagement.

This shift in temporal structure affected how participants experienced the passage of time. Rather than being divided into productive segments, time became fluid and often perceived as slow or stagnant. The lack of structured activity contributed to feelings of idleness and diminished purpose, reinforcing the experience of unemployment as ongoing and inescapable. Research on unemployment supports this finding, indicating that loss of routine is associated with reduced psychological well-being and a weakened sense of control (Paul & Moser, 2009).

#### **Heightened Dependency and Constrained Autonomy**

Unemployment increased participants' reliance on family members and others for financial support, mobility, and daily needs. This dependency reshaped household roles and affected participants' sense of autonomy. Many

described a transition from being contributors to becoming recipients of support, which altered how they perceived themselves within the family structure.

This shift was not experienced as neutral but carried emotional weight. Reliance on others often involved feelings of hesitation, gratitude, and concern about being a burden. Everyday decisions, including movement and spending, were influenced by the availability of assistance, limiting participants' independence. These findings align with research showing that financial dependency can affect self-perception and reduce agency in daily life (Lister, 2004).

### **Reduced Social Participation and Withdrawal from Community Life**

Participants reported a decline in social participation, characterized by reduced presence in community spaces and limited interaction beyond immediate family. Without employment or financial resources, there were fewer reasons and fewer means to engage in social activities. Over time, this led to a pattern of withdrawal, where participants avoided gatherings and public spaces.

Social withdrawal was influenced not only by practical constraints but also by emotional considerations. Anticipation of judgment or discomfort in social interactions contributed to avoidance, reflecting the role of stigma in shaping behavior. Studies have shown that fear of negative evaluation can lead to reduced social engagement among unemployed individuals, particularly those facing visible forms of difference (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011).

The reduction in social participation also affected participants' sense of belonging. Absence from community activities limited opportunities for recognition and interaction, contributing to feelings of invisibility. In this context, unemployment was experienced as a form of social distancing that extended beyond the workplace into broader community life.

### **Emotional Strain and Persistent Worry in Everyday Life**

Emotional strain emerged as a constant feature of participants' daily lives. Feelings of worry, sadness, and uncertainty were not confined to specific events but were embedded in everyday thinking. Concerns about financial stability, health, and future prospects contributed to a persistent sense of insecurity.

This emotional burden affected motivation, decision-making, and overall well-being. The continuous nature of worry suggests that unemployment was experienced as a chronic condition rather than a temporary disruption. Research on unemployment and mental health supports this pattern, indicating that prolonged joblessness is associated with heightened psychological distress and reduced life satisfaction (Paul & Moser, 2009).

The emotional dimension of unemployment was closely linked to other aspects of daily life, including dependency and social withdrawal. Together, these factors created a reinforcing cycle where emotional strain both resulted from and contributed to constrained living conditions.

### **Theme 3: Coping as Endurance Within Constraint**

Coping among participants was not oriented toward resolution or escape from unemployment but toward sustaining everyday life within ongoing constraints. Rather than reflecting active problem-solving aimed at securing employment, coping took the form of endurance, where individuals adjusted their expectations, regulated their emotions, and maintained continuity despite limited opportunities. This pattern suggests that coping was shaped by the perceived permanence of unemployment and the structural barriers that restricted change.

### **Emotional Restraint and Acceptance**

Participants demonstrated a tendency toward emotional restraint, managing their responses to unemployment by suppressing outward expressions of frustration and disappointment. This restraint was often linked to a desire to maintain composure in social settings and to avoid burdening others with personal struggles. Over time,

emotional regulation evolved into a form of acceptance, where participants came to terms with their situation as a way of preserving psychological stability.

Acceptance did not imply satisfaction with unemployment but functioned as a strategy to reduce emotional distress. By reframing their circumstances as part of life rather than as an injustice to be resisted, participants were able to maintain a degree of emotional balance. This aligns with research suggesting that acceptance can serve as an adaptive coping mechanism in contexts where individuals have limited control over external conditions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

However, this form of coping also carried limitations. While acceptance helped manage emotional strain, it could also reduce motivation to pursue opportunities, particularly when barriers were perceived as insurmountable. In this way, coping through acceptance reflects both resilience and constraint, illustrating the complex interplay between agency and limitation.

### **Moral Self-Regulation and Behavioral Control**

Coping also involved processes of moral self-regulation, where participants monitored and adjusted their behavior to align with personal and social expectations. This included avoiding actions that could be perceived negatively by others, maintaining respectful conduct, and adhering to norms of patience and humility. Such practices were often rooted in a desire to preserve dignity despite adverse circumstances.

Participants described being conscious of how their actions might be interpreted within the community, particularly in the absence of employment. This awareness influenced how they presented themselves and interacted with others, reinforcing a sense of accountability to social norms. Moral self-regulation functioned as a way to maintain self-worth, even when external validation through work was unavailable.

At the same time, this emphasis on behavioral control could limit the expression of dissatisfaction or critique. Participants often chose silence over confrontation, reflecting a coping strategy that prioritized social harmony over personal expression. This dynamic highlights how coping is shaped not only by individual needs but also by the expectations embedded within the social environment.

### **Engagement in Small Tasks and Everyday Distractions**

Participants engaged in small, routine activities as a way to structure their time and divert attention from the challenges of unemployment. These activities included household tasks, simple errands, and informal contributions within the family. While these actions did not constitute formal employment, they provided a sense of activity and, in some cases, a limited sense of usefulness.

Such engagements functioned as practical coping mechanisms, allowing participants to maintain a level of participation in daily life. They also served as distractions from persistent worry, offering temporary relief from the psychological burden of unemployment. Research on coping suggests that engagement in routine activities can support emotional regulation by providing structure and reducing rumination (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).

However, the scope of these activities remained constrained. Without access to broader opportunities, participants' engagement was limited to immediate environments, reinforcing the boundaries imposed by unemployment. These small tasks, while meaningful in the moment, did not alter the underlying condition, highlighting the distinction between coping and change.

### **Reliance on Faith, Family, and Social Support**

Participants frequently drew on family relationships, faith-based practices, and informal support networks as sources of strength. Family members provided material assistance, emotional reassurance, and practical help, forming a central support system in participants' lives. This reliance reflects the importance of kinship structures in rural communities, where support is often organized through close interpersonal ties.

Faith also emerged as a significant coping resource. Participants described turning to prayer and spiritual reflection as a means of finding comfort, hope, and meaning. These practices helped frame unemployment within a broader perspective, allowing individuals to interpret their experiences in ways that reduced distress and sustained endurance.

Social support, however, was not uniform. While some participants experienced consistent assistance, others encountered limitations in the availability or reliability of support. This unevenness reflects the variability of informal support systems, which can both mitigate and reinforce experiences of vulnerability. Overall, coping was sustained through a combination of internal regulation and external support, enabling participants to navigate their circumstances despite ongoing constraints.

#### **Theme 4: Community Responses as Mixed Sources of Support, Judgment, and Silence**

Community responses played a significant role in shaping how participants experienced unemployment. Rather than being uniformly supportive or exclusionary, these responses were varied and often contradictory, encompassing acts of assistance, expressions of judgment, and moments of silence. These interactions influenced participants' sense of belonging, identity, and self-worth within the community.

##### **Informal and Conditional Support**

Participants described receiving support from community members in the form of small favors, occasional assistance, and inclusion in informal activities. This support was often unstructured and based on personal relationships rather than formal programs. While such assistance provided practical benefits, it was typically limited in scope and duration.

Support was also perceived as conditional. It depended on factors such as visibility, relationships, and perceived deservingness. Participants were aware that assistance was not guaranteed and could fluctuate over time. This conditional nature of support created uncertainty, reinforcing the need for self-reliance even within a supportive environment.

##### **Judgment, Pity, and Social Distancing**

Alongside support, participants experienced forms of judgment and pity that shaped their interactions within the community. These responses were expressed through attitudes, language, and behavior that positioned participants as dependent or incapable. While sometimes framed as concern, such responses contributed to feelings of marginalization.

Pity, in particular, was experienced as ambivalent. While it could lead to assistance, it also reinforced unequal relationships, where participants were viewed as recipients rather than contributors. This dynamic aligns with studies on stigma, which highlight how well-intentioned responses can perpetuate perceptions of inferiority (Goffman, 1963).

Social distancing was another form of response, where participants felt excluded from certain activities or interactions. This distancing was not always explicit but was perceived through subtle cues, such as lack of invitation or reduced engagement. These experiences contributed to a sense of invisibility and reinforced the boundaries between participants and the broader community.

##### **Silence and Non-Intervention**

Silence emerged as a distinct form of community response. Participants noted that their situation was often unaddressed, with little direct acknowledgment or discussion of their unemployment. This lack of engagement created a sense of ambiguity, where participants were neither fully included nor explicitly excluded.

Silence functioned as both a protective and limiting mechanism. On one hand, it avoided confrontation and preserved social harmony. On the other, it prevented open dialogue about challenges and needs, limiting

opportunities for collective support or change. This reflects how social norms can shape responses to vulnerability, prioritizing cohesion over direct engagement.

### **Moments of Inclusion and Recognition**

Despite challenges, participants also experienced moments of inclusion and recognition that contributed positively to their sense of belonging. These moments included being invited to participate in community activities, receiving acknowledgment for small contributions, and being treated with respect in social interactions.

Such experiences, while not constant, played a meaningful role in shaping participants' perceptions of their place within the community. They demonstrated that inclusion was possible, even within constrained conditions, and provided a counterpoint to experiences of exclusion and marginalization. These moments highlight the potential for community-based practices to support dignity and participation, even in the absence of formal employment.

The findings of this study reveal that unemployment among persons with disabilities is not a singular or isolated condition but a multidimensional lived experience shaped by the interaction of personal, social, and structural factors. Across themes, unemployment emerged as a condition of exclusion, embodied limitation, and constrained participation that permeates daily life.

Meaning-making, everyday experience, coping, and community response are not discrete domains but interconnected processes that continuously influence one another. Experiences of exclusion shape how participants interpret unemployment, which in turn affects how they cope and engage with their environment. Similarly, community responses influence both identity and emotional well-being, reinforcing or mitigating the effects of unemployment.

The prominence of endurance as a coping strategy reflects the limited opportunities available for change within the participants' context. Rather than seeking transformation, participants focused on sustaining themselves within existing constraints. This pattern underscores the need to view unemployment not only as an economic issue but as a lived condition requiring social and contextual understanding.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of unemployment as experienced by persons with disabilities in rural communities. They highlight the importance of addressing not only structural barriers but also the social and relational dimensions that shape everyday life. Interventions aimed at improving employment outcomes must therefore consider the broader context in which unemployment is lived, including issues of dignity, recognition, and participation.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of how unemployment among persons with disabilities is typically understood. Rather than appearing as a single condition defined by the absence of work, unemployment emerges here as something that unfolds across multiple layers of everyday life. It is experienced through the body, shaped in social interaction, and continuously interpreted in relation to one's sense of self and place within the community. What becomes evident is that unemployment is not simply a state but a condition that is lived, negotiated, and, in many ways, endured.

A key thread running through the findings is the way exclusion operates not only through formal structures but through ordinary, repeated encounters. Participants did not speak of exclusion as a dramatic or isolated event. Instead, it appeared in more subtle forms: in the hesitation of employers, in the comparisons made with others, and in the quiet understanding that opportunities were not meant for them. Over time, these experiences accumulate. They begin to shape expectations, narrowing the range of what individuals consider possible. In this sense, exclusion becomes less about explicit denial and more about a pattern that is gradually internalized.

This pattern resonates with broader discussions in disability studies that highlight how social perceptions of capability influence access to work (World Health Organization, 2019). Yet what stands out in this study is the

temporal dimension of that process. Being repeatedly positioned as incapable does not remain external. It begins to inform how individuals see themselves. Participants often spoke in ways that suggested a shift from questioning exclusion to anticipating it. This movement from resistance to expectation marks a significant transformation in how unemployment is experienced. It is no longer encountered as something that happens to them but as something that defines the limits within which they move.

The body plays a central role in this process. Participants did not describe their physical conditions only in terms of functional limitation. The body appeared as a constant point of reference, something that shaped how they moved through space, interacted with others, and imagined their possibilities. Physical discomfort, restricted mobility, or visible difference became intertwined with social meaning. The body, in this sense, was not neutral. It was read by others and, in turn, became a basis for judgment. This dual role aligns with perspectives that view disability as both embodied and socially mediated (Shakespeare et al., 2021). However, the findings also suggest that this relationship is not static. It is reinforced in everyday situations, where bodily difference is repeatedly linked to assumptions about incapacity.

Such experiences have implications for how individuals understand time and routine. Without the structure provided by employment, daily life begins to lose its familiar rhythm. Participants described days that felt open-ended, where activities were guided more by necessity than by intention. Time was not divided into productive segments but often felt continuous and undifferentiated. This shift may seem subtle, yet it carries weight. Work, beyond its economic function, provides a framework through which time is organized and meaning is assigned to activity. Its absence creates a gap that is not easily filled.

Research has long pointed to the psychological effects of disrupted routine (Paul & Moser, 2009), but the present findings show how this disruption is tied to context. In a rural setting where opportunities are already limited, the absence of work does not lead to alternative forms of engagement. Instead, it often results in a contraction of activity. Participants' worlds become smaller, centered on the household and immediate surroundings. Over time, this narrowing of space contributes to a sense of detachment from the wider community.

Dependency becomes more pronounced within this setting. Participants frequently relied on family members for financial support, mobility, and decision-making. While such support is often given willingly, it introduces a shift in relational dynamics. Individuals who once saw themselves as contributors begin to see themselves as recipients. This change is not merely practical. It carries emotional weight. Participants spoke of hesitation, of thinking twice before asking for help, and of a persistent awareness of being a burden. These experiences echo existing work on poverty and dependency (Lister, 2004), but they also highlight how dependency is felt at the level of everyday interaction.

What complicates this further is the interplay between dependency and dignity. The absence of work affects not only material conditions but also the ability to fulfill socially valued roles. In many communities, work is closely tied to responsibility and recognition. When individuals are unable to participate in this way, questions of worth and contribution arise. Participants described moments where they felt diminished, not necessarily because of direct criticism, but because of subtle cues in how they were treated. These cues, whether in tone, gesture, or silence, communicate a sense of reduced standing.

At the same time, dignity is not entirely lost. It is negotiated in small ways. Participants spoke of maintaining respect in their interactions, of choosing restraint over confrontation, and of holding on to personal values even in difficult circumstances. This suggests that dignity is not solely granted by external recognition but is also sustained through internal practices. Yet this form of dignity is fragile. It exists within a context where validation is limited, and where opportunities to assert one's value are constrained.

Coping, within this landscape, takes on a particular character. It is less about overcoming unemployment and more about living with it. Participants did not describe elaborate strategies aimed at changing their situation. Instead, they spoke of managing their responses, of finding ways to get through the day, and of adjusting their expectations. Emotional restraint appears frequently in their accounts. Rather than expressing frustration openly, participants often chose to contain it. This choice is not simply personal; it is shaped by the desire to maintain harmony and avoid adding strain to relationships.

Acceptance also plays a role, though it is not straightforward. It does not imply agreement with their situation but reflects a way of making it bearable. By framing unemployment as something that is part of their life rather than an anomaly, participants are able to reduce the intensity of distress. This aligns with research on coping under conditions of limited control (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However, acceptance carries a tension. While it helps sustain emotional balance, it may also reduce the impulse to seek change, particularly when barriers are perceived as fixed.

Small, everyday activities become another means of coping. Tasks such as helping around the house or running errands provide a sense of movement and participation. These activities may seem minor, yet they serve an important function. They create moments where individuals can act, contribute, and feel engaged. At the same time, they remain bounded within the limits of the immediate environment. They do not open pathways to broader opportunities, but they help sustain a sense of continuity.

Support from family and faith also shapes how participants navigate their situation. Family provides not only material assistance but also a form of stability. Relationships offer reassurance and, at times, a buffer against the effects of exclusion. Faith, on the other hand, introduces a different dimension. It allows participants to place their experiences within a larger frame of meaning. Through prayer or reflection, unemployment is not only endured but interpreted in ways that offer comfort. These practices do not remove constraints, but they alter how those constraints are experienced.

The community itself presents a complex picture. It cannot be described as either supportive or exclusionary in a simple sense. Participants encounter a range of responses. At times, there are acts of kindness: small forms of assistance, invitations to participate, moments where they are acknowledged. These instances matter. They create spaces where individuals feel seen and included, even if only briefly.

Yet these moments coexist with other forms of interaction that are more difficult to navigate. Pity, for example, appears as a recurring theme. While it can lead to support, it also reinforces a sense of difference. Being seen as someone in need, rather than as someone capable, shapes how individuals are positioned within the community. Similarly, there are instances of distancing, where participants feel excluded without clear explanation. These experiences are often subtle, conveyed through absence rather than action.

Silence adds another layer to this dynamic. Participants noted that their situation is not always openly discussed. There is a tendency to avoid direct engagement with the issue of unemployment. This silence can be read in different ways. It may reflect a desire to maintain harmony, but it also limits opportunities for dialogue and collective response. In the absence of conversation, experiences remain individualized, and the possibility of shared understanding is reduced.

What becomes apparent is that community responses are shaped by competing forces. There is an impulse to support, grounded in social ties, but there are also norms and perceptions that reinforce difference. These forces do not operate separately. They intersect in everyday interactions, creating a landscape that is at once enabling and constraining.

Bringing these elements together, the study points toward a view of unemployment that is deeply embedded in context. Structural barriers remain central, but they are only part of the picture. What matters equally is how these barriers are lived: how they are felt in the body, negotiated in relationships, and interpreted over time. The findings suggest that addressing unemployment requires attention not only to access and opportunity but also to the conditions under which individuals experience and make sense of their situation.

In this light, interventions that focus solely on employment outcomes risk overlooking the broader dimensions of the issue. Efforts to support persons with disabilities must consider how inclusion is enacted in everyday life, how dignity is sustained, and how community practices can either reinforce or challenge existing patterns. Without this attention, initiatives may address symptoms without engaging the underlying dynamics that shape experience.

The study does not claim to provide a complete account of unemployment among persons with disabilities. Rather, it offers a closer look at how this condition is lived within a particular setting. In doing so, it underscores the value of approaching unemployment not only as a policy concern but as a human experience that unfolds in specific contexts, shaped by the interplay of structure, interaction, and meaning.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of persons with disabilities facing unemployment in a rural community in Mankayan, Benguet. However, several limitations must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings.

First, the study is limited by its small sample size of ten participants. While this is appropriate for phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth over breadth, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all persons with disabilities or to other contexts. Instead, they offer context-specific insights grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

Second, the study is situated within a single rural community in the Cordillera region. The socio-cultural and economic characteristics of this setting may differ from those in urban areas or other regions, which may influence how unemployment is experienced. As such, the transferability of findings depends on the similarity of contexts rather than statistical representation.

Third, the study relies on self-reported data gathered through interviews. Participants' accounts are shaped by personal reflection, memory, and interpretation, which may introduce subjectivity. However, this subjectivity is inherent and appropriate within phenomenological inquiry, where the focus is on meaning and lived experience.

Fourth, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and bracketing, the researchers' perspectives may have influenced data interpretation. While steps were taken to minimize bias through reflective practices and systematic analysis, complete neutrality cannot be fully achieved in qualitative research.

Finally, the study focuses exclusively on unemployed persons with disabilities and does not include perspectives from employers, policymakers, or other stakeholders. Including these perspectives in future research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and institutional dimensions of unemployment.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the study but instead situate its findings within a specific context and methodological approach. They also point to areas for further research to deepen and expand understanding of unemployment among persons with disabilities.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) facing unemployment in a rural community in Mankayan, Benguet. The analysis reveals that unemployment is not encountered as a discrete economic condition but as an enduring and structured experience embedded in everyday life.

In relation to the central research question, unemployment is experienced as a persistent condition shaped by exclusion, constrained opportunity, and the interaction between bodily limitation and social evaluation. It is not interpreted as a temporary absence of work but as a stable reality that defines participants' position within both the labor system and the community.

Participants' descriptions and interpretations of unemployment indicate that it is mediated through processes of labeling and social judgment. Experiences of being perceived as incapable or unfit contribute to the internalization of marginality, influencing how participants understand their employability and social value. These interpretations are not formed in isolation but are grounded in repeated encounters within institutional and community settings.

Unemployment also restructures daily life in material and relational terms. The absence of work disrupts temporal organization, reduces opportunities for participation, and increases dependence on others. These changes extend to relationships and self-perception, where participants experience shifts in their roles within the household and the community, often accompanied by diminished autonomy.

The meanings attached to unemployment are closely linked to dignity, identity, and participation. Participants interpret unemployment as a condition that challenges their sense of worth, particularly in contexts where work is associated with responsibility and recognition. At the same time, identity is not entirely negated but continuously negotiated within conditions of constraint, reflecting an ongoing effort to maintain self-definition despite limited opportunities for validation.

Coping is characterized by endurance rather than transformation. Participants employ strategies that allow them to manage emotional strain and sustain everyday functioning, including restraint, acceptance, and reliance on immediate support systems. These forms of coping do not resolve the condition of unemployment but enable individuals to persist within it, indicating a constrained form of agency shaped by structural limitations.

Community responses are experienced as variable and context-dependent, encompassing forms of support, expressions of judgment, and instances of non-engagement. These responses influence participants' sense of belonging and reinforce or mitigate experiences of exclusion. The coexistence of assistance and marginalization reflects the complexity of social relations within the community.

The findings demonstrate that unemployment among persons with disabilities is a multidimensional lived experience constituted through the interaction of structural conditions, social processes, and personal interpretation. Understanding unemployment in this way requires moving beyond economic indicators to examine how it is experienced, given meaning, and sustained within everyday life. These insights point to the need for targeted community-based employment interventions that integrate livelihood support, social inclusion strategies, and disability-sensitive program design, particularly within rural contexts where structural opportunities remain limited.

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